

Chairman Walden's Remarks at U.S. Chamber of Commerce's "Combating the Opioid Crisis: From Communities to the Capital"
March 1, 2018

(As prepared for delivery)

I appreciate you all being here and for the U.S. Chamber giving me the opportunity to speak with you about this incredibly important topic. I'm also happy to see that the White House is hosting an event this afternoon focused on combating this crisis.

As you all know, the opioid crisis has taken a strangle-hold on our communities – killing our friends, family members, and neighbors regardless of race, socioeconomic status, geographic location, or political affiliation.

I've been holding roundtables back home in Oregon – just like many of my colleagues across the country. And at these roundtables I've had the chance to meet with the victims, families, doctors, treatment advocates, and law enforcement officers who are dealing directly with this crisis.

At a recent discussion, a man named 'Mike' showed up. Literally, he just showed up. Mike didn't know anyone in the room. He'd heard of our meeting to discuss opioid abuse on the news and wanted to share his story.

Mike's son was injured in a school sporting accident, and he became addicted to the prescription painkillers provided by his doctor to aid in recovery. Eventually, Mike's son made the all-too-familiar transition to a cheaper opioid source: heroin. To this day, Mike's son still struggles with his addiction that began with opioid abuse.

Mike went on to speak about his sister who also suffered from addiction. A nurse, Mike commented that she found herself with easy access to opioid pills. When coworkers and others caught on, she moved and continued to procure pills elsewhere. Sadly, she died as a result of her addiction. Mike came to the meeting – a roundtable I held with law enforcement and medical professionals – in hopes that sharing his stories could help ensure it doesn't happen to other families.

It's heartbreaking. And in every community in the country, you'll hear stories like Mike's. This crisis reaches coast to coast. Fueled by dangerous new chemical versions, illicitly manufactured drugs, and complicit bad actors contributing to the

spread of opioid abuse, in one year alone, overdoses have taken more American lives than the entire Vietnam War. Scan the headlines on any given day and it's clear that this epidemic is spiraling out of control with no end in sight...unless we take action.

It is for folks like Mike and the countless other families who have lost a loved one that I've made combating the opioid crisis the top priority for the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

While our committee has a strong legislative history working on this issue, namely through the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act, or CARA, as well as through 21st Century Cures, which together devoted record amounts of federal resources to combating the opioid epidemic – the crisis that is ravaging our nation has continued to grow. And our efforts simply must grow to meet this challenge.

At Energy and Commerce, our overall effort to combat the opioid crisis is moving on two tracks: investigative and legislative. I'd like to provide you an update on each of those tracks today.

Early in 2017, we initiated multiple bipartisan oversight investigations into some of the issues that are contributing to the opioid crisis.

Following reports of “patient brokers” who are serving as intermediaries and profiting from the recruitment of patients seeking treatment for addiction, the Oversight and Investigations subcommittee initiated an investigation into abuse allegations in July 2017, highlighting a need for greater oversight and accountability of treatment centers.

Additionally, our O&I subcommittee is conducting an ongoing investigation into Fentanyl, which is a synthetic opioid that is 50 times more potent than heroin and 100 times more potent than morphine. In fact, it is the leading cause of opioid overdose deaths. It is easy and very cheap to illicitly manufacture and has been appearing in communities across the country, mostly coming from China and clandestine labs in Mexico.

And in May of last year, the committee opened an investigation into reports of large quantities of opioids that flowed into the state of West Virginia. As we work to learn more about this issue, our Oversight & Investigations subcommittee will hold a hearing on March 20th where Acting DEA Administrator, Robert Patterson, will testify about the DEA's efforts in West Virginia.

These combined investigative efforts will help our committee better understand the causes of the crisis before us and will continue to inform our legislative efforts as we move forward.

Which brings me to our second track: an entirely new legislative effort.

Energy and Commerce has been quietly developing bipartisan legislative bills to combat the crisis for months. We held a Member Day in October 2017 where more than 50 members of the House brought forth solutions to deal with this crisis. I am personally grateful for Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi's participation at that hearing.

It's a testament to how this issue is impacting every district of the country regardless of party or region; members from all across the political spectrum both on and off the committee participated and brought forth constructive ideas.

You see, combating the opioid crisis must be a collaborative, bipartisan effort. No one person has the answers. And no one bill will provide the solution. Which is why we've taken a methodical and expansive approach to moving multiple bipartisan legislative ideas forward.

Building off of these efforts, our Health subcommittee held the first of three planned legislative hearings yesterday. In this legislative hearing, our efforts focused on bipartisan legislation related to the Controlled Substances Act to help communities balance enforcement and patient safety.

We examined a number of policies that will improve access to treatment for mental health and substance use disorders, make important updates to outdated law, and review ideas to help providers and pharmacists.

All of these solutions share the common goal of protecting our families, friends, and neighbors and giving law enforcement tools to get dangerous drugs out of our communities. We also want to ensure licensed health professionals are able to safely dispose of unused prescriptions.

For example, Rep. John Katko's Stop the Importation and Trafficking of Synthetic Analogues – or SITSA Act, gives law enforcement the tools they need to help get illicit synthetic drugs, like fentanyl, off our streets without compromising

important public health and research protections. The bill modernizes scheduling guidelines to keep pace with the fast-changing nature of synthetic drugs.

Another example, a bipartisan proposal from Rep. Mark DeSaulnier and Rep. Buddy Carter, the Empowering Pharmacists in the Fight Against Opioid Abuse Act, would help pharmacists to decline to fill prescriptions for controlled substances when they suspect the prescriptions are fraudulent, forged, or appear to be for abuse or diversion.

In our hearing we examined how the majority of patients on hospice are dispensed medications, often controlled substances, to manage their pain, and frequently residual medications that will not be used by the hospice patient remain in the home.

To address this issue, Rep. Tim Walberg and Rep. Debbie Dingell have come up with a bipartisan proposal, the Safe Disposal of Unused Medication Act, which helps reduce the number of unused controlled substances at risk of diversion or misuse by allowing hospice workers to dispose of these medications in patients' homes.

These were just a few of the bills that were considered this week. In our upcoming legislative hearings, we'll examine even more ideas to combat the opioid crisis. These two additional hearings will focus on legislation related to public health and prevention as well as insurance coverage-related bills, all intended to promote treatment and recovery.

I'd like to preview a couple of expected items with you today.

First, Jessie's Law, another bipartisan bill from Reps. Tim Walberg and Debbie Dingell, which is named after Michigan resident Jessie Grubb, who tragically died of an opioid overdose. Jessie was a recovering heroin addict who was prescribed prescription opioids after a hip surgery. Jessie's Law would help ensure doctors have access to a consenting patient's prior history of addiction in order to make fully informed care and treatment decisions.

This is an example of common-sense legislation based on real-world experiences to address issues contributing to the opioid crisis – and just the type of solution our committee seeks to move forward in the coming weeks.

Speaking of commonsense...we've heard repeatedly from folks in districts across the country about how we're still lacking basic information on the effectiveness of federal programs and other efforts to combat the opioid crisis. In order to develop the best plans to attack this problem, we need the best information.

Rep. Bob Latta has introduced the Indexing Narcotics, Fentanyl, and Opioids – or INFO Act, to improve and make available important data on the opioid crisis and the effect of federal efforts to combat the epidemic. The INFO Act would establish a clearinghouse that would compile information on federal efforts to stop the opioid crisis. The information would be used to help federal, state, and local officials develop the most effective strategies to prevent addiction, treat those that are addicted, and keep prescription drugs from falling into the wrong hands.

I mentioned earlier how record amounts of federal resources have already been devoted to fighting this epidemic, and we must do even more. But what has been surprisingly difficult and extremely frustrating for local officials across the country is the ability for those on the front lines to seek federal resources to help combat the crisis in their communities. The INFO Act would help track federal funding being used to combat the epidemic.

As many of you know, the DEA regularly holds National Prescription Drug Take Back Days. These events are a safe, convenient, and responsible way to dispose of excess prescription drugs, while also raising awareness of the opioid crisis and the potential for abuse of medications. A record-breaking 912,305 pounds -- or 456 tons -- of prescription drugs were collected at the most recent take back day in October of last year.

Thankfully, the DEA has another take back day coming up in April. For each take back day, I've encouraged our members to participate and raise awareness of the event back in their districts and direct their constituents to official take back locations. The take back day is a valuable service and an incredibly useful tool in the toolbox to combat the opioid crisis.

Frankly, making it easier to dispose of opioids is just a commonsense idea, and Rep. Richard Hudson is taking opioid disposal another step further. His legislation would require the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office (GAO) to study new and innovative technologies that claim to be able to safely dispose of opioids and other unused medications. GAO would review and detail the effectiveness of these disposal methods. This bill would also necessitate the Attorney General to

promulgate guidelines for the safe site-of-use in-home disposal of prescription drugs.

Jessie's Law, the Info Act, and examining ways to expand and improve opioid disposal are just a few examples of the solutions to expect in our upcoming legislative hearings.

As I said, we're moving full speed ahead on two tracks at Energy and Commerce, and with the start of our hearing series this week, the rubber has really hit the road on our legislative efforts.

I'm happy to say that our leadership in the House supports our efforts to craft collaborative, bipartisan solutions to combat the opioid crisis, and our goal is to have a legislative package to the floor by Memorial Day.

I encourage you to follow along in our effort by visiting our website:
<https://energycommerce.house.gov/opioids/>.

This is my top priority as Chairman of Energy and Commerce. We owe it to families and loved ones of the more than 100 Americans who die every day from an opioid overdose to press on in our fight to end this crisis. And that's just what our committee intends to do.

Thank you again for your time, and to the Chamber for having me here today.